428003 - What is meant by the hadith “There is no space in it the width of four fingers but there is an angel there, putting his forehead [to the ground] in prostration to Allah”?

the question

I want to deal with my confusion about the following hadith: The Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “I see what you do not see. The heaven is creaking and it should creak, for there is no space in it the width of four fingers but there is an angel putting his forehead [to the ground] in prostration to Allah, may He be Exalted. By Allah, if you knew what I know, you would laugh little and weep much, and you would never enjoy women in your beds, and you would go out in the streets, beseeching Allah.” Narrated by at-Tirmidhi, who said: It is a sound (hasan) hadith. How can we reconcile between the fact that the angels are huge beings and the fact that it is possible for them to prostrate in a small space the width of four fingers? I know it is better for a man not to try to understand through reasoning matters of the unseen, but I am asking by way of warding off doubts that the Muslim is faced with in his life.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

At-Tirmidhi (2312) narrated that Abu Dharr said: The Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “I see what you do not see and I hear what you do not hear. The heaven is creaking and it should creak, for there is no space in it the width of four fingers but there is an angel there, putting his forehead [to the ground] in prostration to Allah…”

He said: This is a hasan gharib hadith.

The first thing that comes to mind when reading the phrase “for there is no space in it the width of four fingers but there is an angel there, putting his forehead [to the ground] in prostration to

Allah" is that the hadith is highlighting the large number of angels and how they are constantly worshipping Allah, may He be Exalted.

There is nothing to be confused about in this hadith, for several reasons:

1.The angels do not all have the same form.

Allah, may He be Exalted, says:

{All praise be to Allah, the Originator of the heavens and the earth, Who made the angels messengers with wings, two or three or four. He adds to creation whatever He wills. Verily, Allah has power over all things} [Fatir 35:1].

Allah, may He be Exalted, did not explain to us in detail the form and nature of these angels who constantly worship Him, so we should not be confused about a matter of which we do not know the real nature.

2.The condition of the angels (peace be upon them) cannot be compared to that of humans, because Allah, may He be Exalted, has given them the ability to take on a small and gentle form, as we see in the case of Jibril (peace be upon him), whose form is huge [but he could appear in human form].

Al-Bukhari (3232) and Muslim (174) narrated that Abu Is-haq ash-Shaybani said: I asked Zirr ibn Hubaysh about the verse {until he was two bow lengths away or even nearer. Then he revealed to Allah's slave what he had to reveal} [Al-Najm 53:9]. He said: Ibn Mas'ud told us that he [the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)] saw Jibreel with six hundred wings.

Imam Muslim (177) narrated that Masruq said: I said to `A'ishah: What is the meaning of the verses: {Then he approached and came down, until he was two bow lengths away or even nearer. Then he revealed to Allah's slave what he had to reveal }[An-Najm 53:8-10]?

She said: That was Jibreel (peace be upon him). He used to come to him in human form, but on this occasion he came to him in the form which was his true form, and he filled the horizon of the

sky.”

Despite his huge size, Jibril used to come to the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) in human form.

Similarly, in the hadith of Usamah ibn Zayd it is narrated that Jibril (peace be upon him) came to the Prophet of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) when Umm Salamah was with him, and he spoke with him then he left. The Prophet of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said to Umm Salamah: “Who was that?” She said: That was Dihyah. And Umm Salamah said: By Allah, I did not think it was anyone other than he, until I heard the Prophet of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) addressing the people and telling them about Jibril [and that he had come to him in the form of Dihyah].

Narrated by al-Bukhari, 3634; and Muslim, 2451.

3.The hadith does not say that each angel has only the space of four fingers and no more. Rather what appears to be the case from the wording is that even though the space of four fingers is very small in comparison to the vastness of the heaven, one will not find an empty space the size of four fingers, because the entire area of heaven is filled with angels worshipping their Lord, may He be Glorified and Exalted, in such a way that if you were to look at the distance between one angel and another, you would not find it even reaching the size of four fingers; the hadith is not talking about the space the angel occupies when he prostrates, and this is quite clear.

And Allah knows best.